

Aligning for Power:

A Case Study of Bargaining for the Common Good in Minnesota

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Executive Summary

Minnesota has provided perhaps the most inspiring story of statewide progressive breakthroughs in 2023. Casual observers and much news coverage has characterized this breakthrough as the product of a fortuitous 2022 election cycle which ended up delivering control of both houses of the state legislature and the governorship to the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL, as the Democratic Party is known in Minnesota). In fact, the breakthroughs of 2023 were made possible by years of organizing in Minnesota around the Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) model, organizing and campaigning that began even before the term “bargaining for the common good” was attached to this approach.

This report details how that organizing came together over a period of more than a decade, how it built power for working Minnesotans, and how it forged relationships across and among community organizations, advocacy groups, and unions in ways that made the breakthroughs of 2023 possible. These struggles saw a durable yet flexible alignment of progressive Minnesotans take on the most powerful employers and financial powers in their state, winning unions, raising wages, defending voting rights, establishing employment standards, demanding that banks respond to community needs, and fighting for housing, climate, and racial justice.

Many observers have suggested that Minnesota is in many ways an exceptional state, characterized by its proverbial “Minnesota Nice” culture, and have concluded that its recent progressive accomplishments are owing to its exceptionalism and therefore cannot be replicated in other states. This report suggests that it was the BCG model, not the distinctive characteristics of the state that made the breakthrough possible. It traces the evolution of that model from the origins of its first incarnation in the form of Minnesotans for a Fair Economy, which was founded in 2011, up to the present, as the progressive groups aligned with BCG prepare for their next big campaign which will unfold in March 2024.¹

¹ We are deeply grateful for the research help and encouragement of Alisha Volante of Tending the Soil on this report.

Timeline

2005-2009	Groundwork Laying: key organizations begin rethinking and reorganizing their work in ways that end up leading them in a similar direction
2010	SEIU Local 26, ISAIAH, TakeAction Minnesota, CTUL, and NOC start meeting regularly for mutual support and coordination
2011	January: SEIU creates Fight for a Fair Economy (FFE) Spring: Formation of Minnesotans for a Fair Economy (MFE) May 20 - June 1: Cub Foods Hunger Strike September 17: Occupy Wall Street begins in New York City October 11: March on Wells Fargo
2012	May 9: TakeAction Minnesota inaugurates campaign demanding that Target “ban the box” and improve hiring practices November: Successful campaign to defeat the voter photo ID ballot measure wins at the ballot box
2013	May: Minnesota passes Ban the Box legislation MFE targets US Bank in Week of Action; bank agrees to allow Somali remittances October: Target announces it will “Ban the Box” at all stores nationwide
2014	June: Target adopts a responsible cleaning contractor policy acknowledging that contracted janitors should have a right to organize
2015	Inquilinx Unidxs begins tenant organizing in Minneapolis; takes legal action against local landlords December 12: The People’s Congress, an assemblage of 2,000 members of MFE-aligned organizations meet in Minneapolis to review progress and plan for the future

Introduction

Minnesota made national news in 2023 for having had one of the most productive and progressive legislative sessions that any state has produced in decades. The Minnesota legislature passed a law that increased taxes on corporations and high investment earners, enacted a paid family and medical leave program, restored voting rights to returning citizens, set a standard that would make utility companies completely carbon-free by 2040, strengthened the rights of unionized workers, made the school breakfast and lunch program free for all K-12 students, and much more.

Most stories about the Minnesota progressive breakthrough have focused on the importance of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party² having flipped the state senate in 2022, thereby making Minnesota one of the few states in the country with a “trifecta” in which the Democrats controlled the governorship, state senate, and state house. While that political breakthrough was crucial in creating a window for the movement of a large body of progressive legislation, focusing on the politics of 2022 misses something crucial about the Minnesota story: what was accomplished legislatively in 2023 was made possible by years of groundwork-laying power-building, the vast majority of which took place outside of the arena of legislative politics, power-building that involved the alignment of unions and community organizations

² The Minnesota Democratic Party is called the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party.

Timeline Cont'd

2016	May: Minneapolis passes a Sick and Safe Time ordinance after an MFE campaign October: Twin Cities retail janitors become union ending a 44-month campaign
2018	May: Minnesota Homeowners' Bill of Rights enacted Creation of Tending the Soil (an alignment of CTUL, Inquilinx Unidxs, SEIU Local 26, Unidos MN, and the New Justice Project) November: Governor Walz elected
2020	Feb 28: Climate strike May: Murder of George Floyd
2021	September: Inquilinx Unidxs inaugurates rent strike in South Minneapolis November: Minneapolis voters approve rent stabilization measure authorizing city council to frame legislation
2023	June: St. Paul Sick and Safe Time amended and expanded
2024	March Week of Action

There was nothing inevitable about what has been accomplished in Minnesota. While the state has produced progressive political figures, progressives by no means have a natural edge in that state. From 2003 to 2011, the state was governed by Tim Pawlenty, a rising star of the conservative movement who initially won office on a platform of frugality and “no new taxes.” What produced the transformation of Minnesota that became manifest in 2023 took hard work, strategic thinking, and power building that was not initiated and did not begin with politicians, political consultants, and pollsters, but rather emerged from the alignment of grassroots organizations that represent working people and their needs around a transformative vision of the common good.

The Minnesota story provides perhaps the best illustration of an approach to power-building that has come to be called Bargaining for the Common Good. Since 2014, Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) has emerged as both a strategy and a national network of labor and community organizations that share that strategy. BCG has emerged from a common analysis of how to best challenge the concentrations of wealth and power, the explosion of inequality, and the erosion of democracy that are the hallmarks of 21st century

capitalism. As such, BCG is a strategy that has been shaped by the pioneering work of a number of organizations across the country. Among them, the Minnesotans have played a leading role, for their work has both anticipated what came to be known as BCG and contributed important features to its strategy and vision.

In this report, we seek to tell their story not only because it is worth documenting in its own right, but especially because others who seek to build working-class power can learn so much from it.

I. Origins

The origins of BCG in Minnesota preceded by several years the coining of the term “Bargaining for the Common Good.” It began when several organizations—including both unions and community organizations—began to strategize together about how they might align their respective institutions' struggles. The founding groups of this discussion were Service Employee International Union (SEIU) Local 26, the interreligious advocacy organization ISAIAH, the Minneapolis worker center *Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha* (CTUL), a multi-racial people's organization called TakeAction Minnesota (TAMN), and a community organization descended from Minnesota ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) called Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC).

By 2010, each of these organizations were independently arriving at a point in their institutional histories that encouraged them to think strategically and look for allies. After going through a leadership change, Local 26 was completing a multi-year process that had transformed it from a service model union representing janitorial and security workers to an organizing model union intent on building its membership and seeing members take greater ownership of their union. CTUL, founded in 2010, and affiliated with the Interfaith Worker Justice worker center network, was just getting on its feet and gaining traction organizing Latinx workers. ISAIAH was going through a leadership change and separating from the Gamaliel network with which it had long been affiliated so that it could focus on its Minnesota agenda. TAMN, founded in 2006, had only recently established itself as a community based organization with headquarters in Saint Paul and Duluth and was seeking to build its organizational presence. NOC was created in 2010 from what remained of Minnesota ACORN, as the national ACORN organization unraveled in the spring of 2010 under the weight of an all-out assault by rightwing media and organizations such as Project Veritas.

The leaders of these organizations knew and had collaborated with each other before, and they decided to form a table to compare notes and discuss the respective direction of their organizations with each other. As that table took shape in 2010, it provided support, advice, and mentorship during a turbulent period in both Minnesota and the nation.

Nationally, the Great Recession had not yet begun to ease and the Tea Party movement was just gathering steam. The Democratic party was struggling to pass the Affordable Care Act, and heading toward a “shellacking” in the midterm elections. The labor movement was stalled, as it awaited passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), an elusive goal that passed out of reach by the end of 2010 after the death of Sen. Ted Kennedy and his replacement by an anti-union Republican. Labor was also still divided in the aftermath of the 2005 split between the AFL-CIO and Change to Win.

In Minnesota, conservative forces held the balance of power. Republican Tim Pawlenty occupied the governorship in 2010 and was considered a top contender for his party's nomination for

the presidency in 2012. Progressive forces in the state were struggling with national political trends driven by the Tea Party movement and its demand for budget and tax cuts. The Great Recession and the austerity agenda and corporate aggression that it spawned was making clear the urgent need to build a base of progressive working-class power.

Some Minnesota unions were beginning to find creative ways of responding to these conditions. The Saint Paul Federation of Teachers³ had begun experimenting with a new approach to bargaining in its 2009 contract negotiations that pointed toward the yet unnamed Bargaining for the Common Good model. Led by Mary Cathryn Ricker, who assumed leadership of the union in 2005, Saint Paul's teachers made special education a central issue and invited the families served by the program to attend the negotiation. In 2010 the union began to prepare a more elaborate plan for its 2011 negotiations that would have hundreds of community members attending those sessions; in subsequent negotiations it included innovative community-centered demands such as a call for the school district severing relations with banks that would foreclose on students' families during the school year. The Saint Paul teachers were demonstrating that community support was crucial for unions that sought to push back against austerity. Because communities of color were most hurt by the austerity agenda (three-quarters of Saint Paul's public school students came from communities of color, over a third spoke English as a second language, and nearly three-quarters qualified for a free or reduced-priced lunch), it was among them that strong support for a community-based agenda would first find deep resonance.⁴

Similar conditions prevailed statewide. Although whites made up 85 percent of Minnesota's population in the 2010 census it was undergoing a significant demographic shift. Minnesota had been 98 percent white in 1970; by 2020 that percentage would fall to 77. The state's Hispanic population alone grew by 74 percent between 2000 and 2010. Between 2000 and 2020 the Black immigrant population expanded by 274 percent to roughly 100,000.⁵ As the state grew more diverse, however, inequality was more pronounced in communities of color. "Minneapolis has the biggest chasm between people of color and white people in the country—employment, education, housing, health, you name it," declared Betsy Hodges, a former Minneapolis mayor and delegate to the state's 2013 DFL convention.⁶ Setting the priorities in Minnesota was a powerful set of corporate interests. The Twin Cities alone are the location for the headquarters of the nation's largest privately held company, Cargill, and 16 Fortune 500 firms with a combined 2021 revenue of nearly three-quarters of a trillion

³ Now called the St. Paul Federation of Educators.

⁴ Mary Cathryn Ricker, "Teacher-Community Unionism: A Lesson From St. Paul," *Dissent*, Summer 2015, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/teacher-community-unionism-lesson-st-paul/>

⁵ Tory Van Oot, "Minnesota's Black immigrant population soars," *Axios*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/local/twin-cities/2022/02/11/minnesota-black-immigrant-population-pew-census-data>

⁶ Gabriel Thompson, "Minneapolis Has Long Been Fractured by Racial Inequity. Can a New Mayor Change That?," *The Nation*, September 3, 2014. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/one-minneapolis-possible/>

dollars.⁷ Changing the status quo in the state would not be possible without finding a way to leverage a countervailing power that counterbalanced the enormous influence of these entities.

As they grappled with this challenging context, unions and community organizations began to come together to form the beginnings of what would become a common good strategy.

II. Building the Nucleus of an Alignment

The seeds for what became a powerful Minnesota progressive movement were sown between 2005 and 2010 as five organizations each began to confront obstacles that encouraged them toward the discovery that they would best advance their individual organizational agendas if they reached out to build alliances with other organizations that shared a similar analysis.



SEIU (Local 26)

Javier Morillo became president of SEIU Local 26 in 2005, after giving up a post as a visiting professor at Macalester College, dropping out of his doctoral program at the University of Michigan, and working briefly as SEIU's statewide political organizer. He was recruited to run for the leadership of Local 26, a janitors' local whose membership was overwhelmingly Latinx, in part because he was himself Puerto Rican by birth. Shortly thereafter, Morillo brought in Greg Nammacher, a veteran community and labor organizer, who served as secretary-treasurer. Determined to make the invisible labor of janitors and security workers visible, Local 26 took an aggressive approach to organizing and bargaining, working hard to nurture leaders from the union's rank-and-file, who would eventually constitute a majority of the union's staff. Morillo took pride in his reputation as a "Thug in Pastels," adding security workers to his union and organizing aggressive actions such as a 2007 protest at the annual meeting of the Building Owners and Managers Association that disrupted its gathering at a toney golf course.

The Local was jolted in 2009, however, when 1,250 of its members were swept up in I-9 audits conducted by ICE, accused of possessing suspect documents. SEIU had been among the first unions to endorse Barack Obama and Local 26 had worked hard to turn out the vote in Minnesota in 2008, but, to his chagrin, Morillo now saw Obama's own administration targeting Local 26 members. Worse, although the union was able to get legal help for some of those targeted, the majority were fired. The

⁷ These companies ranked by their place in the 2021 Fortune 500 are: UnitedHealth Group, Target, Best Buy, 3M, CHS Inc., U.S. Bancorp, General Mills, C.H. Robinson, Land O'Lakes, Ecolab, Ameriprise Financial, Xcel Energy, Thrivent Financial, Polaris, Industries, Securian Financial Group, Patterson Cos. Inc.. Their combined revenue in 2021 was \$595.03 billion. See: <https://www.greatermnsp.org/doing-business-here/major-employers/> Minneapolis is also home to the largest privately held company in the United States: Cargill. In 2021 its revenue was 134 billion. The combined 2021 revenue of these publicly and privately held corporations was therefore \$729 billion.

experience was devastating. It was also instructive: it illustrated for Morillo, Nammacher, and the local's leadership that the union needed to build deeper alliances and confront power beyond the workplace where most unions tended to concentrate their efforts. They needed to build worker power on a deeper and more far-reaching level.⁸

CTUL



Veronica Mendez Moore and Merle Payne began their work building a base of low wage workers in Minneapolis in 2007. Both brought to bear a breadth of experience within the labor movement and community organizing; whereas Payne had spent four years with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and a year at SEIU, Mendez Moore had organized hotel workers with HERE in Chicago before moving into the area of affordable housing. They drew upon these experiences in constructing a popular education model of leadership development at CTUL. Programming was not focused upon creating a one-directional flow of information from staff towards workers but rather a space where unique individual experiences and understandings could be shared to create a collective knowledge. They opened their doors to low wage workers experiencing widespread wage theft. In addressing these concerns, their approach was not to formulate discrete remedial actions but to raise broader questions of how and why wage theft had become prevalent as part of a systemic analysis of how workers could prevent it from occurring in the first place.

By 2010 Mendez Moore, Payne, and CTUL's worker leaders had decoupled their organization from Interfaith Worker Justice, established CTUL as a membership organization with a board of directors made up of workers, and built a base with a sizable presence within the retail janitorial sector and other sectors drawn almost exclusively at this time from Spanish-speaking communities. While a foundation was in place, CTUL felt itself ready to expand its agenda and implement a more ambitious plan of direct action to strengthen worker leadership and to support workers in bringing about significant change within low-wage workplaces in Minneapolis.

ISAI AH



Doran Schrantz joined ISAI AH in 2002, roughly a year after the organization got its start. She came to Minnesota from Chicago, where she had attended the University of Chicago and spent time in the city doing theater when she discovered organizing work. In Chicago, her organizing efforts included work with immigrants and a stint with a coalition of neighborhood groups that was the target of criticism for contracting with police to carry out community policing. In the process, she gained contacts and experience, and ultimately discovered the value of training as key to good organizing.

⁸ Javier Morillo-Alicea, interview with Joseph McCartin, October 12, 2023; Greg Nammacher, interview with Joseph McCartin, October 19, 2023.

In seeking out additional training, she developed an interest in church-based institutions after a training session with the Gamaliel National Network. Shortly after, she learned about ISAIAH as an organization known for training and investing in organizers.

At the time Schrantz joined ISAIAH, the organization was going through growing pains after its creation from four local organizing projects (Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Saint Cloud, and the suburbs of the Twin Cities) involving Lutherans and Catholics. The organizing projects had additional support from larger organizations, such as the Office for Social Justice and the Catholic Archdiocese of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. While trying to find its identity, ISAIAH had good organizers, a leadership base, and supporters who were committed to the organization.

Housing policy was one of the areas in which ISAIAH had sought to do work in its early days, though it did not have the capacity to make inroads with the state legislature. It did begin to embrace the work of University of Minnesota scholars Myron Orfield (also a Minnesota state senator) and John Powell. Orfield's work in the 1990s and early 2000s around "Metropolitics" in particular offered a template for ISAIAH. Combining analysis of regional development patterns, demographics, and policy, "Metropolitics" sought regional solutions to issues like land use, tax policy, and effective governance.⁹ By the early 2010s, however, ISAIAH had parted ways with Orfield and Metropolitics over philosophical differences on policy, especially in the area of public education, and as regionalism supporters became increasingly hostile toward housing development in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.¹⁰

TakeAction Minnesota

TakeAction Minnesota (TAMN), founded in 2006, with roots that trace back to the work of Sen. Paul Wellstone, decided in 2009 to adopt a forward thinking approach to the statewide governor's election set for 2010, inaugurating a program called reNEW Minnesota which it announced in



September 2009. Its goal was to work to elect an ally as governor as a strategy to build a broader movement to advance a progressive governing agenda in 2011. Although its preferred candidate, State Assembly Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher, was edged out by U.S. Senator Mark Dayton in the 2010 primary, TAMN's reNEW Minnesota campaign began to generate momentum around a progressive statewide agenda that drew TAMN into closer cooperation with other progressive

allies.

⁹ Doran Schrantz, interview with Joseph A. McCartin and James C. Benton, Nov. 10, 2023; Myron Orfield, *Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1997); Orfield, *American Metropolitics: The New Suburban Reality* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2002); Orfield, *Activists' Guide to Metropolitics* (Minneapolis: Metropolitan Area Research Corporation, 2003); at https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1050&context=imo_studies.

¹⁰ Schrantz interview.

Neighborhoods Organizing for Change

The nation's largest community organization, ACORN, collapsed in 2009 after being demonized by Fox News and other outlets and suffering from malfeasance in its national office. In several states, new organizations sprang up from the ashes of ACORN affiliates. Among these was Minnesota Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC), which was founded in 2010 by former organizers and board members of Minnesota ACORN. It focused its energies on addressing economic issues that affected communities of color, primarily in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, using direct action tactics to advance its agenda.



By 2010, just as the Tea Party took off nationally, the leaders of these organizations began meeting on a regular basis. Because the organizations possessed different organizational models and internal cultures, their leaders learned a lot by comparing notes. These discussions built relationships which were enhanced by what one of their leaders called “empowered seconds,” the secondary leadership of the organizations that could more easily lay aside institutional imperatives to think collectively with the leaders of the other organizations. The organizations found that they often shared the same targets and analysis and they worked together to refine a way of collaborating to advance their organizational goals in alignment with each other.

III. A Model Emerges: Minnesotans for a Fair Economy

In January 2011, an opportunity arose for the Minnesota organizations to move their growing collaboration to a higher level and to broaden the network. At the winter meeting of the SEIU international executive board, President Mary Kay Henry, who had taken office the previous May, moved for board approval of an ambitious campaign called the Fight for a Fair Economy (FFE). In this effort, SEIU committed tens of millions of dollars to fostering organizing projects among low-wage workers in multiple cities around the country. In Minnesota, FFE money went to SEIU's locals, including Local 26 and Healthcare Minnesota, the SEIU local that represents healthcare workers statewide. In Minnesota, SEIU locals departed from the pattern that FFE undertook in many locations, where FFE funding would lay the basis for the emergence of the Fight for \$15 agitation among fast food workers by 2012; soon the Fight for \$15 would become SEIU's most visible national fight. Rather than investing in an SEIU-led campaign like Fight for \$15, the Minnesota SEIU locals used the FFE money to deepen the collaboration they had begun to develop with CTUL, ISALAH, NOC, and TAMN. They





Figure 1: Fight for \$15 Rally (Source: CTUL)

wanted to go deep investing in a program that would align these and other organizations in a shared power-building project. They called it Minnesotans for a Fair Economy (MFE).¹¹

In contrast to the Occupy movement, which erupted in September 2011 and subsided two months later without having left a significant institutional legacy in most of the cities where it blossomed, the organizations involved in building MFE were determined to build something durable. Its key elements were:

Shared Vision and Analysis: Alignment Instead of Coalition

A foundational insight of the Minnesotans was that they were not constructing a transitory coalition, they were building an enduring *alignment*. Coalitions, they had learned, brought like-minded organizations together on a short-term basis to campaign for a shared goal. Once the goal was reached, the coalition dissolved. Coalition partnerships were transactional relationships of mutual benefit; they could bring organizations into relationship around a campaign without ever creating a shared vision or sense of mission that transcended the campaign. Such a model, they believed, could not build the sort of deep institutional relationships that the organizations believed they needed if they were to successfully confront the powerful forces that shaped Minnesota’s economy and politics, big employers like Target, and financial institutions like US Bank.

Coming into alignment did not mean sacrificing one’s organizational priorities or stretching already overstretched staff capacity to meet the needs of one’s partner organizations. Rather it meant aligning the organizational goals, targets, and timing of one’s action with that of allied organizations so as to gain power from the synergies that would develop.

While alignment did not necessitate giving up on one’s organizational priorities, it did require the development of a shared analysis of power and how to build it. As Merle Payne from CTUL described it, that shared analysis was concerned with “how to address social injustices by increasing

¹¹ For background see, The Engage Network and Movement Strategy Center, *Case Study on Minnesotans for a Fair Economy*, October 2013, <https://movementstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Case-Study-on-Minnesotans-for-a-Fair-Economy.pdf>

popular control over the economy.”¹² MFE began building this shared analysis early in its organizing. On September 10, 2011, it convened a “Summit for a Fair Economy,” in Minneapolis that drew over 500 members from the participating organizations at which participants discussed issues such as financialization, austerity, and deepening inequality.¹³

Shared Staff: Development of the Mobile Team

In order for an effective local alignment to exist and endure, a key contention was that MFE funds should be deployed in a fashion that supported collective action and promoted shared resources. On Local 26’s part, leaders wished to avoid the establishment of transactional relationships where they assumed the role of patron and community organizations came to serve as clients. One of the most practical manifestations of these ideas existed in the Mobile Team, a collectively budgeted and managed unit that consisted of staff with expertise in policy, data, communications, and logistics, and included a couple of researchers and organizers too. The unit was, as its name implied, temporarily assigned to different campaigns on a needs basis when extra capacity was required to expand and intensify operations. SEIU furnished funding for the Mobile Team on a 90/10 basis, using FFE money to put up 90 percent of the funding for shared staff while partner organizations, which were often strapped for resources, contributed 10 percent to indicate their buy-in.

While access to the research and organizing capacity may have been familiar for Local 26, the Mobile Team was transformative for community partners with a limited number of paid full time staff. In discussing a 2011 CTUL campaign, Veronica Mendez Moore observed: “we were still only at that time, maybe a three-and-a-half person organization, but with this support of the mobile team, all of a sudden we were like a giant that could do anything.”¹⁴

Shared Targets: Solidarity Campaigning

The third component of the model MFE developed was the construction of campaigns in which different organizations directed their specific organizational demands against the same target(s) often in synchronized fashion. Campaigns were planned out long in advance and in coordination with aligned organizations. A key component of shared campaigns was the “Week of Action,” a compression during which different aligned organizations led demonstrations against the same

¹² Payne, “My Enemy’s Enemy is My Friend.”

¹³ See: “Union Organizer Stephen Lerner at Summit for a Fair Economy,” September 10, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2w9UISfgR4>; and <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150288135633031.346513.185753078030&type=1>

¹⁴ Veronica Mendez Moore, interview with Joseph McCartin and Patrick Dixon, November 6, 2023.

target(s). As one journalist put it, these weeks of action had the effect of “making the whole city your bargaining committee.”¹⁵

An important principle was that the aligned organizations agreed in advance that they were free to settle their own negotiations with the mutual target when their baseline goals had been met but would not do anything to undermine the campaigns being waged by their aligned allies, who might not yet have settled. This approach allowed the aligned groups freedom to deal with their own institutional imperatives while avoiding least common denominator settlements that left each organization feeling as though the fight had failed to provide wins substantial enough to sustain their individual organizations.



Figure 2: Awood Protest at Amazon Fulfillment Center, May 2021 (Source: Awood Center)

Once the model was in place, other organizational partners were encouraged to join, and they did. One of the first was SEIU Healthcare Minnesota (now Healthcare Minnesota & Iowa). With a large membership that spread beyond the Twin Cities and across the state, Healthcare Minnesota represented hospital, healthcare, and nursing home workers, and it was deeply involved in Minnesota politics due to the fact that its own bargaining parameters were so impacted by state budgets. An organization of renters called *Inquilinx*

Unidxs por Justicia (United Renters for Justice) formed in 2015 out of Minneapolis’s Lyndale neighborhood; its involvement with the alignment helped push housing issues to the center of progressive concern. A later member of the alignment was the Awood Center, a Minneapolis worker center founded in 2017. Awood (the Somali word for “power”) organizes East African workers (including many who work for Amazon), and its presence in the alignment further diversified its composition. These and other organizations that aligned their fights with MFE and its successive iterations gave the alignment model tremendous diversity and vitality.

It is important to note that the alignment both expanded and contracted and changed shape over time as new organizations joined and others stepped back, or even failed altogether. NOC, which played an important role in the early phase of the alignment’s work, folded by the end of 2017. Yet even as NOC was folding, MFE was helping launch a broader statewide alignment called Our Minnesota Future (OMF). It brought together a broader cross-section of statewide progressive groups

¹⁵ Barb Kucera, “Making the Whole City Your Bargaining Committee,” *Labor Notes*, February 19, 2013, <https://www.labornotes.org/2013/02/making-whole-city-your-bargaining-committee>

around a “long-term strategy to build the power to govern in Minnesota.”¹⁶ As OMF was taking off, CTUL was helping to create a new formation called Tending the Soil (TTS), which launched in 2018. TTS was a new alignment table centered around organizations populated and led by workers of color.¹⁷ These multiple alignments made the Minnesota movement unusually nimble and responsive to changing needs and conditions.

IV. Turning Campaigns Into Crucibles for Power-Building and Deepening Alignment

While the MFE model was built on a set of shared principles, its refinement was the product of experimentation and hard-won experience. The deep relationships forged among and between organizations came from taking risks together around a common vision and building a deep sense of trust among participants. This is not to say that MFE was free of tensions, disagreements, or tactical and cultural differences. Indeed, these factors were a constant part of the life of the MFE. However,

“workers suffered under terrible conditions working for contractors hired by other retailers in the area and wage theft was widespread in those workplaces,”

Veronica Mendez-Moore

with a deep alignment around the vision toward which the constituent organizations were working, MFE not only successfully avoided conflicts that would break its unity, it learned to draw energy from the differences in orientation, thinking, and constituency make-up that characterized its organizational participants.

This becomes clear when we trace the growth of the MFE vision over the course of several key campaigns.

¹⁶ OMF’s membership included: the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-Minnesota); CTUL; Clean Up the River Environment (CURE); Communication Workers of America (CWA); Education Minnesota; Inquilinxs Unidxs por Justicia (United Renters for Justice); ISALAH; Jewish Community Action (JCA); Land Stewardship Project; Main Street Alliance; Comunidades Organizando el Poder y la Accion Latina (COPAL); Minnesota 350; Minnesota Nurses Association; Navigate Minnesota; OutFront Minnesota; SEIU Local 26; SEIU Local 284; SEIU Healthcare Minnesota; SEIU Minnesota State Council; Sierra Club; St. Paul Federation of Teachers, and TakeAction Minnesota. On Our Minnesota Future, see: <https://landstewardshipproject.org/our-minnesota-future-building-governing-power-to-advance-lsp-values/>.

¹⁷ TTS members are: CTUL, Inquilinxs Unidxs por Justicia / Renters United for Justice; New Justice Project, SEIU Local 26, and Unidos, MN. See: <https://tendingthesoil.org/about-us>.

Losing and Learning: Cub Foods, 2011

The first significant MFE campaign targeted Cub Foods, the largest local grocery chain, which was headquartered in Stillwater, MN, with a significant presence in Minnesota and Illinois. In May 2011, shortly after the launch of MFE, eight members of CTUL initiated a twelve day hunger strike calling on Cub Foods to join a Worker-driven Social Responsibility (WSR) model program with a code of conduct that contracted cleaning companies must follow in the treatment of workers who clean their stores. Frustrated by months of stifled attempts to meet, hunger strikers set up at the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Minneapolis and held daily demonstrations at the nearest Cub Foods branch two blocks away.

The action was the opening component of a broader campaign to establish standards within the janitorial sector of big box retailers. Cub Foods responded by suing CTUL for trespassing and defamation. CTUL ultimately agreed to end the hunger strike and its campaign targeting Cub Foods without achieving a code of conduct in exchange for Cub Foods dropping the lawsuit. While unsuccessful in achieving its stated objectives, the action represented an early stress-test of the connections within MFE and had significant longer-term implications for the retail janitorial sector within the Twin Cities. In 2011 there were roughly thirty independent retail cleaning contractors competing with one another within the area; “workers suffered under terrible conditions working for contractors hired by other retailers in the area and wage theft was widespread in those workplaces,” Mendez Moore observes. Yet chastened by the increased public attention, some contractors left the market and retailers partnered with a smaller collection of increasingly larger contractors. By 2013 the sector had consolidated under four major players. For SEIU Local 26 this dramatically changed the parameters for unionization within the industry.

Using a Ballot Initiative as an Organizing Opportunity: Defeating Voter ID, 2012

In 2012, MFE took a big risk on behalf of the constituents represented by its organizational members: it went all in in a fight to defeat a ballot measure that would have amended the Minnesota constitution to require voters to present a photo identification before casting a ballot. This was a risky fight because polls in 2011 indicated that the passage of the amendment was all but inevitable: nearly 80 percent favored the initiative according to one poll and advocates of the amendment were able to raise enough from the national conservative movement to outspend opponents by a 2-1 margin. Fighting this battle could have led to a disappointing defeat for MFE and been seen by some of the alignment’s organizational members as a futile distraction from fights that seemed more winnable.

MFE not only won the ballot fight, it used the process of waging that battle as a forge that tied the organizational members of the alignment more closely to each other and to other allied groups beyond MFE. The multiple constituencies of MFE allowed it to mobilize people across divides of race, religion, gender, and immigration status around a campaign that took as its slogan “Protect My Vote!” The organizing paid off. By June 2012, polls showed that support for the initiative had slipped

to 58 percent. On the eve of the election, opponents led supporters of the amendment by 51-46 and on election day the ballot's opponents won going away, 52-46. It was a remarkable victory and one that instilled confidence in the alignment's members as they turned to other campaigns.

The absence of a living wage and benefits and Target's failure to fulfill the terms associated with its public financial support most significantly impacted Black and brown communities in Minnesota and exacerbated the state's already dramatic racial job disparities.

“Targeting”: Building Power by Challenging an Economic Giant, 2012-14

Minneapolis is home to Target, one of the nation's largest retailers. In taking on this powerhouse corporation, MFE demonstrated a central tenet of its sharpening analysis: the larger and more powerful the corporate target, the more constituencies can be organized to bring demands against it.

In April 2013 TAMN, CTUL, Local 26, ISAIAH, and MFE issued a joint report titled *Expect More: How Target Chooses to Shortchange Minnesota's Communities of Color*. The report contended that Target, headquartered in Minnesota and a large actor in the state's political landscape, had received over \$20m in tax subsidies and abatements to construct new buildings on its central campus and create over 1,500 new jobs but was falling short as an employer. Highlighting cases of wage theft and discriminatory hiring practices, the report focused particular attention on the private night time cleaning contractors that constituted much of the janitorial sector at big box retailers. The absence of a living wage and benefits and Target's failure to fulfill the terms associated with its public financial support most significantly impacted Black and brown communities in Minnesota and exacerbated the state's already dramatic racial job disparities.

This report was accompanied by months of organizing and action among contract workers in the retail janitorial sector, which included three strikes in 2013 against janitorial contractor companies that clean Target stores.¹⁸ Threatened with a fourth strike in June 2014, Target created a “responsible contractor policy” which allowed employees of its cleaning contractors to form a union without employer interference, established safety committees with representatives selected by workers, and provided a guarantee of at least one day off every week.

¹⁸ Steve Payne, “The Workers Center-Union Partnership That’s Transforming Big-Box Janitorial Work,” *In These Times*, January 2, 2015, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/a-workers-center-union-partnership-in-minnesota-is-transforming-big-box-jan>.

*Figure 3: Striking janitorial service contractors,
(Source: CTUL)*



Different members of the alignment had different priorities. For CTUL, the goal was to persuade Target to adopt a responsible contractor policy; for Local 26, victory meant union representation with the cleaning contractors, both at Target and across the sector. TAMN was out front in leading the state's Ban the Box campaign, with ISALAH demanding job training programs at Target's north suburban campus for West African church

communities nearby.¹⁹ As a result of their campaigning Target agreed in October 2013 to a nationwide policy whereby they would not question job applicants concerning past offenses until the time of interview; the company subsequently became a willing partner in promoting a Ban the Box law at the statewide level which took effect in January 2014. Target similarly supported Sick and Safe Time legislation and the Fight for \$15 in 2016 and when Minneapolis created a workplace advisory committee that included representatives of both business and labor, the company was an active proponent of improved citywide standards of employment.

Big Box retailers don't have a strong record of supporting progressive labor reforms. What made Target move? Being headquartered in Minneapolis cannot be discounted as a contributing factor. Merle Payne from CTUL observes: "It's based in a very progressive urban area and they have to have a more public response or like thousands of people can show up outside their offices in downtown all the time and protest, right?"²⁰ Yet Target was also the subject of four simultaneous and aligned direct action campaigns that repeatedly proved their capacity to mobilize workers and community members and create increasing levels of public pressure. At one point, the campaign took the general concept of "collective bargaining" to a whole new level apart from the workplace as the leaders of Local 26, CTUL, TAMN, and ISALAH met with high level representatives of Target at a community library to discuss possible solutions to the multiple issues their members had with the company.

¹⁹ Gail Rosenblum, "TakeAction Minnesota helped Target ban the box," Minneapolis Star Tribune, November 10, 2013, <https://www.startribune.com/rosenblum-takeaction-minnesota-helped-target-ban-the-box/231304701/?refresh=true>.

²⁰ Merle Payne, interview with Patrick Dixon, November 13, 2023.

Challenging Financialization / Bargaining with the 1 Percent

In 2011, weeks before the Occupy Wall Street movement erupted in New York City on September, 17, 2011, TAMN and other members of MFE organized a series of protests against Minnesota's largest banks, including US Bank, TCF Bank, Wells Fargo, and other Minnesota financial powers behind the slogan "Banks Got Bailed Out, We Got Sold Out."²¹ This inaugurated a line of attack against financialization and its devastating impact on Minnesota's economy that would reemerge repeatedly in the years ahead. In March 2013, banks were again targeted in a Week of Action.²² Subcontracted cleaners and security workers struck their contractors at downtown office buildings, activists held demonstrations at Target, and protesters engaged in civil disobedience at Wells Fargo branches (where they demanded an end to mortgage foreclosures).



Figure 4: TAMN Protest Against Wells Fargo, November 11 (Source: MN Daily)

Through such actions, MFE was able to highlight the interconnections that existed among Minnesota's power elite and bring attention to the financial powers behind Minnesota's major employers, real estate owners, and drivers of state and local policy. In the process, MFE was able to demonstrate how entwined are the fates of workers and their communities.

One example of this emerged from the efforts of SEIU Local 26, which represents janitors and security guards at US Bank's corporate headquarters in Minneapolis. Many of Local 26's members are Somali immigrants. They found themselves unable to send remittances home to their families when most American banks, reacting to charges that remittances were abetting money laundering and funding terrorism, began to refuse transferring remittances to Somalia, despite the fact that an estimated 40 percent of Somalis rely on remittances from relatives abroad. MFE took on the issue by joining Local 26 in demanding that US Bank guarantee fair wages and benefits to its employees and

²¹ Randy Furst, "200 Protesters March from Place to Wells Fargo," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, October 11, 2011, <https://www.startribune.com/200-protesters-march-from-plaza-to-wells-fargo/131536808/>.

²² Barb Kucera, "Twin Cities Banks and Employers Slammed During Action Week," *Labor Notes*, March 21, 2013, <https://labornotes.org/2013/03/twin-cities-banks-and-employers-slammed-during-action-week>.

that it restart remittances to Somalia.²³ This led to yet another imaginative expansion of the concept of collective bargaining: direct negotiations between mosques, money transfer businesses, SEIU Local 26, and US Bank to reopen financial pathways for the remittances. (Later the climate justice organization 350.org joined the discussions and got commitments from US Bank to curtail certain investments in fossil fuels.)

Over the years, the alignment has continued to expose the role that banks and private equity firms play in shaping the overall economy in ways that exploit working people, holding economic power accountable.

ISAIAH and *Inquillinxs Unidxs*: Fighting for Fair Housing

The seeds for MFE’s housing justice activism were first sown during the Occupy Wall Street movement in the fall of 2011 and grew out of the engagement of MFE with the Occupy activists who encamped in Hennepin County government plaza. Trusting relationships were forged early on with support from MFE for the occupation. As the protesters’ eviction from the government plaza became imminent, MFE’s support helped shift the Occupy movement towards the creation of Occupy Homes MN, which resulted in direct negotiations with US Bank and other local lenders, preventing a series of foreclosure evictions, through standoffs with sheriffs as activists surrounded homes with metal tubing and handcuffs in acts of civil disobedience. One Occupy Homes victory came when a Local 26 member who cleaned the office of US Bank’s CEO was able to win back her house from a foreclosure initiated by US Bank. Such experiences built the base that would become a key part of NOC’s housing activism and would later help push for the state’s Homeowners’ Bill of Rights.



Figure 5 Cancel Rent Protest (Source: CTUL)

By 2013, ISAIAH had joined with other organizations, including MFE, Occupy Homes MN, and NOC to fight the wave of foreclosures triggered by the housing crisis in the wake of the Great Recession. A campaign that included anger (homeowners occupying legislators’ offices) and occasional theatrics (in the week before Easter 2013, 20 clergy members and supporters placed a cross in the driveway of a Brooklyn Park home in foreclosure after its owner lost his job) culminated in a “homeowners’ bill of rights” that overwhelmingly passed the Minnesota legislature. The new law required mortgage servicers to offer loan modifications to all eligible homeowners, gave homeowners

²³ Stephen Lerner and Saqib Bhatti, “Labor Must Take on Capital,” *Jacobin*, August 9, 2016, <https://jacobin.com/2016/08/unions-labor-hedge-funds-private-equity/>.

more time to submit loan modifications to halt foreclosures, and granted attorneys' fees to homeowners who successfully sued to stop foreclosures.²⁴

Shortly after the homeowners' bill of rights was enacted, renters in Minneapolis and organizers helped create a new organization, *Inquilinx Unidxs Por Justicia* (IX). One of the organizers, Jennifer Arnold, recalled housing emergencies like evictions and bedbug infestations on the rise among the immigrant and Latinx populations in Lyndale, the Minneapolis neighborhood she was organizing.²⁵

“housing is a public resource, not a pathway
to make money”

Jennifer Arnold

In response, organizers undertook a door-knocking campaign in April 2014 that focused on multifamily rental buildings in Lyndale. The door-knocking campaign led to a community meeting that brought together residents and housing experts, including a Legal Aid attorney, a tenant hotline lawyer, and staff from the Minneapolis inspections division. It also included Roberto de la Riva, another organizer who for this meeting served as an interpreter. The meeting drew a significant crowd and was successful; afterward, de la Riva, now IX's Director of Cooperative Projects, suggested continuing the meetings with residents.²⁶

The meetings increased communication among tenants. Gradually, tenants began requesting repairs, turning to city inspectors, and increasing their demands. By late 2015, IX had been founded, with a primarily Latinx, Spanish-speaking membership. At its inception, IX used a tenant-union model to put pressure on landlords. Campaigns against two landlords were particularly fruitful, yielding a settlement and persuading another to sell his holdings, which IX is now converting to a co-op. It also attracted attention from the city to discuss housing policy.²⁷

The next areas in the fight for renters and housing justice include a renewed push for rent stabilization in Minneapolis through the Home to Stay coalition, and a new campaign to make affordable housing a reality across Minnesota. IX, ISAIAH, and SEIU have been involved in that push

²⁴ Schrantz interview; “MN Passes Nation’s Strongest Homeowners Bill of Rights,” Occupy Homes MN, May 29, 2013 (<https://popularresistance.org/mn-passes-nations-strongest-homeowners-bill-of-rights/>); Marlys Harris, “Isaiah, a coalition of congregations, reminds us foreclosure crisis is not over,” MinnPost, March 29, 2013, <https://www.minnpost.com/cityscape/2013/03/isaiah-coalition-congregations-reminds-us-foreclosure-crisis-not-over/>

²⁵ Jennifer Arnold, interview with James C. Benton, Nov. 13, 2023.

²⁶ Arnold interview.

²⁷ Arnold interview; J.D. Duggan, “Minneapolis lays out conditions for large landlord to keep renting homes in city,” *Minnesota Lawyer*, January 13, 2023, <https://minnlawyer.com/2023/01/13/minneapolis-lays-out-conditions-for-large-landlord-to-keep-renting-homes-in-city/>.

for rent stabilization since 2020. They have achieved some wins thus far, including a referendum approved by voters in 2021 that enabled the Minneapolis city council to pass a rent stabilization ordinance, although the council has yet to follow through. For social housing, Arnold said the goal was to create “housing that is permanently affordable, that is community controlled, and that has a wide range of incomes living in it...housing is a public resource, not a pathway to make money.”²⁸

Fighting for Racial Justice

Minnesota’s rapidly diversifying population also has exposed the disparate effects of government and private sector policies on residents. Long before the uprisings created by George Floyd’s murder at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer in 2020, these disparities were coming into sharper focus. In 2010, the Economic Policy Institute reported the region’s Black residents had an unemployment rate three times the rate of their white counterparts. Other disparities exist in poverty rates and educational attainment as well.²⁹

A key response to the status quo came in 2013, when TAMN, CTUL, SEIU Local 26, ISALAH, and MFE instituted a campaign to fight the disproportionate impact of hiring practices by Target. Beyond its well-known retail brand and status as one of the state’s major employers, the report found Target engaged in policies that harmed many of its workers, specifically low-wage workers and workers of color. These practices included:

- Hiring contractors who engaged in wage theft against their employees;
- Receiving public subsidies from communities and exemptions from localities requiring Target to pay workers a living wage or add jobs;
- Engaging in discriminatory hiring practices, including refusing to hire workers who had served punishment for crimes previously committed.³⁰

The report came amid a campaign that led the legislature, in 2013, to prohibit private employers from seeking a job applicant’s criminal history before an interview or extending a conditional job offer. This measure expanded on a similar 2009 ban for public employers. Ban the box legislation was intended to help reduce racial disparities in employment; for instance, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found a disparity between African Americans and whites in Minnesota

²⁸ Arnold interview; Roshan Abraham, “What Happened to Rent Control in Minneapolis?” *Backyard*, August 24, 2023, <https://nextcity.org/urbanist-news/what-happened-to-rent-control-in-minneapolis>.

²⁹ Gabriel Thompson, “Minneapolis Has Long Been Fractured by Racial Inequity. Can a New Mayor Change That?” *The Nation*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/one-minneapolis-possible/>.

³⁰ *EXPECT MORE!: How Target Chooses to Shortchange Minnesota’s Communities of Color Expect More! How Target Chooses To Shortchange Minnesota’s Communities of Color*, A Report by Minnesotans for a Fair Economy, CTUL, SEIU Local 26, ISALAH, and Minnesotans for a Fair Economy, 2013, https://www.thenation.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/df12097fc4cd23cbde_bfm6ywsfb.pdf.

with criminal records was four times higher than the national average. As noted above, later that year, Target announced it would adopt the “ban the box” practice at its stores nationwide.³¹

The following year, MFE constituents TAMN and SEIU Local 26 featured prominently in the election of Betsy Hodges – herself a member of NOC – as Minneapolis mayor. Hodges campaigned on a platform of addressing racial disparities through equitable policies. In defeating Mark Andrew, a former state DFL chair, Hodges’ election demonstrated the demographic and political shift underway in Minneapolis: at the time of her election, 40 percent of residents were people of color, and 15 percent foreign-born.³²

By 2018, the push for racial equity led five groups – CTUL, IX, SEIU Local 26, the New Justice Project, and Unidos Minnesota – to form a new alignment table, called Tending the Soil (TTS), a formation explicitly centered around organizations populated and led by workers of color. This alignment sought to shape local policies in ways that aided poorer residents of the Twin Cities. TTS set out to challenge local policies that benefited developers, encouraged gentrification, ignored the need for workers to earn fair wages, or supported police state tactics that protected property but not people.³³



Figure 6 Community Members Rally After The Murder of George Floyd, 2020 (Source: CTUL)

In 2020, the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer – a death captured on a cell phone video and shared with the world – created an uprising in the Twin Cities. In the violence that ensued as many as 1,500 businesses in the Twin Cities were damaged or destroyed by both protesters and agents provocateurs, often concentrated in ethnic neighborhoods. The video of Floyd’s death generated shock and outrage worldwide, but also posed challenges to groups within the racial justice alignment. Doran Schrantz, of ISAIAH, recalled tens of millions of dollars flowed into Minnesota, creating disruptions within small groups like the Minnesota

Freedom Fund, a bail fund, and the Black Visions Collective, a Black liberation organization aligned with transgender and LGBTQ communities as well as Black Lives Matter, received millions of dollars in contributions. Calls to disband the police through a change in the Minneapolis city charter were met

³¹ Minnesota Department of Human Rights, “Ban-The-Box and Criminal Records in Employment” (Saint Paul: Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2018, https://mn.gov/mdhr/assets/BantheBox_Brochure_r2Final_opt_tcm1061-335905.pdf).

³² Thompson, “Minneapolis Has Long Been Fractured by Racial Inequity. Can a New Mayor Change That?”

³³ New Justice Project, <https://www.newjusticeprojectmn.org/>; Unidos MN, <https://unidos-mn.org/>.

with a backlash from voters in the 2021 municipal elections, where that charter change failed – even as voters approved a charter change to allow the city council to impose rent control.³⁴

The George Floyd murder and uprising, and the subsequent electoral backlash in 2021, offered a series of lessons to Minneapolis movement groups. One was that in addition to ensuring the movement’s orientation aligned with and represented the “multiracial, majoritarian working class of the city,” leaders and organizations needed to avoid making a vanguard political position representative of the people.³⁵ This was all the more important for two other reasons. First, moments of mass mobilization can reveal the limitations of the model of deep organizational alignment by flooding the struggle with an influx of many activists who lack a base organization or shared analysis of power and objectives. Second, just as the alignment’s organizations were learning and adapting, so too were the cities’ corporations and financial powers. As the electoral demographics of Minneapolis shifted, these interests no longer passively assumed that they had the capacity to protect their interests. They were now activated and becoming increasingly adept at contending for the electoral votes of communities of color.

Striking for Climate Justice, 2020

Climate change is creating existential crises both ecologically and socially. Yet to date it has been difficult to organize a unified response to these crises. Tensions have marked relations between environmental groups that are pushing for a carbon neutral economy and unions whose members feel threatened by the loss of good jobs as the economy changes. Calls for a “just transition” alone have not been sufficient to overcome these tensions. Taking action in a way that unites workers, unions, and environmentalists around a common agenda has therefore been a challenge. It is precisely that challenge that the Minnesota alliance took up in supporting the nation’s first union-authorized climate strike, a one-day walkout of janitors in support of a set of demands that would not only improve safety and working conditions for janitors but also dramatically reduce the carbon footprint of Minnesota’s economy.

Researchers estimate that corporate office towers, including those that house the headquarters of such companies as U.S. Bank, Wells Fargo, UnitedHealth Group, and Ameriprise, account for over 70 percent of the carbon emissions from Minnesota’s buildings. On February 28, 2020, 4,000 janitors of SEIU Local 26 launched a one-day strike protesting unfair labor practices and seeking to establish a new fund focused on green cleaning techniques that would reduce those carbon emissions, demanding

³⁴ Schrantz interview; Elections & Voter Services, City of Minneapolis, “2021 Ballot Questions,” <https://vote.minneapolismn.gov/results-data/election-results/2021/ballot-questions/>.

³⁵ Schrantz interview.

as well the creation of a “community bargaining table” at which further reductions could be negotiated. It was an unprecedented event.

Bringing it about took hard work. The union’s first move was to survey its members prior to bargaining, which revealed that 40 percent of Local 26’s membership was already feeling the impact of climate change. It involved its membership intensively in the formulation of bargaining demands, providing simultaneous translation in its meetings for the many languages of its members, including Spanish, Somali, Vietnamese, Amharic, and Nepalese. As it worked to unify its members around a set of demands that included the path-breaking green demands, the union reached out to local climate activists, including the Sierra Club, MN350, and the BIPOC Climate Table. Especially important was the involvement of high school students who led MN Youth Climate Strikes, which was part of a national network of youth climate strikers. When the union struck on February 28, it asked all of these allies to join its members when they marched. Then, when the union got down to serious collective bargaining with the cleaning contractors Local 26 utilized its open bargaining tradition to good effect. After its walkout, it welcomed environmentalists, students, and other allies to attend as it bargained with the employers over its green demands.



Figure 7 Climate Justice March, February 2020, (Source: Labor Notes)

After setting a deadline after which they would launch an open-ended strike, the union and employers worked through a marathon 22-hour bargaining session which produced a path-breaking contract. In addition to significant wage and benefit gains, the janitors won funding for a Labor-

Management Cooperation Fund for a green education initiative.³⁶ Since winning this contract, janitors have had access to classes on green technology and cleaning techniques paid for by the new labor management fund.³⁷

V. How Deepening Alignment Paved the Way for a Progressive Breakthrough, 2022-23

While Republicans had looked forward to a “red wave” sweeping across the nation in the midterm elections of 2022, no such development occurred in Minnesota. Instead, Governor Tim Walz won reelection by a comfortable 52.3 to 44.6 percent margin, cementing DFL control of the executive branch for the longest consecutive period (16 years) in Minnesota’s history. Walz’s Republican opponent, Scott Jensen, had attempted to use the crime issue and purported dissatisfaction with the restrictions that Walz had instituted to address the COVID-19 pandemic as his chief issues. But Walz, a former teacher, countered with a defense of women’s right to choose (made more salient by the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* decision), and a proposal that a significant part of the state’s budget surplus be invested in improving public education. Even more significantly, the DFL unexpectedly took control of both houses of the state legislature for the first time since 2014 setting the stage for the most productive legislative session in the state’s history.³⁸

The legislative breakthrough that happened in Minnesota in 2023 had in truth been long in the making. Since its successful struggle to block the voter ID ballot measure in 2012, MFE and its successive iterations of aligned organizations had been working steadily on the development of a statewide “race-class narrative” that could expose the structural roots of the state’s power inequities. Beginning with their collaboration in MFE, ISAIHA, SEIU, and TAMN anchored this work going forward. These organizations agreed that they needed a more powerful tool to counter the growing racially-inflected right wing tropes they were hearing in Minnesota. They worked hard on centering race, not only at the narrative level, but by demonstrating the political power of numbers of statewide organizations systematically highlighting race-class inequities. By relentlessly focusing on this

³⁶ Jeremy Brecher, “First Union-Backed Strike to Protect the Climate wins Contract,” Labor Network for Sustainability, March 31, 2020, <https://www.labor4sustainability.org/articles/first-union-backed-strike-to-protect-the-climate-wins-contract/>.

³⁷ “Commercial Janitorial SEIU Local 26 Janitors Timeline,” SEIU Local 26, <https://www.seiu26.org/commercial-janitorial>.

³⁸ Briana Bierschbach, “DFL Gov. Tim Walz wins second term for Minnesota governor over Republican Scott Jensen,” *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, November 9, 2022, <https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-2022-election-dfl-governor-tim-walz-republican-scott-jensen-race-results/600222708/?refresh=true>.

approach over multiple electoral cycles, they eventually convinced much of the DFL's establishment to adopt this analysis. The results were transformative.

The issues that the Minnesota alignment had been campaigning on for years helped to shape political debate in 2022. Having helped the DFL win the "trifecta," the social and political ecosystem that had emerged from the cross-fertilization and alignment of the organizations that had participated in the MFE, TTS, and other allied progressive formations then helped shape a governing agenda that came to dramatic fruition in 2023.

The list of legislative accomplishments in 2023 is staggering. Among the breakthroughs are labor legislation that:

- allows workers to opt out of anti-union captive audience meetings;
- offers enhanced wage theft protections to construction workers, holding general contractors accountable for wage violations by their subcontractors;
- sets safety standards for meatpacking workers;
- creates a Nursing Home Standards Board that will provide the basis for sectoral bargaining in the state;
- expands the scope of public sector collective bargaining;
- ensures paid sick and safe time for all Minnesota workers.

In addition to the labor law breakthroughs, Minnesota enacted a slew of other measures that addressed the needs of broad sections of the state. Among the accomplishments of these laws were:

- Minnesota became one of only three states that offer free meals to all public school students, regardless of income;
- bills protecting reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people became law;
- Minnesotans can now claim up to 20 weeks of paid family and medical leave;
- undocumented residents can get driver's licenses;
- housing justice advocates won \$1 billion for affordable housing;
- gun safety advocates won a "red flag" law that allows authorities to confiscate firearms from those judicially determined to constitute a threat to themselves or others; background checks for private gun purchases;
- a Restore the Vote Law granted voting rights to 50,000 formerly incarcerated individuals on parole or probation, a disproportionate number of whom were African American;



*Figure 8 SEIU 26 Advocates for Drivers Licenses for All, 2023
(Source: SEIU 26)*

-
- a law committed the state to be 100 percent carbon-free by 2040.

The sweeping nature of this legislative bonanza has led many to christen it the “Minnesota Miracle.”³⁹ But, as the foregoing summary makes clear, what happened in 2023 was less a miracle than the sweet fruits of a long, innovative campaign built around a brilliant and flexible operational model that aligned multiple membership organizations around a common analysis, deep organizing, and community mobilization.

VI. The Evolution and Future of a Power-Building Model

The aftermath of the 2023 legislative wins highlights the importance of one of the central principles of the model that MFE birthed in 2011: alignments of the kind it built are not short-term limited-purpose endeavors that disband after the achievement of (or failure to achieve) a set of discrete objectives. They will instead set the stage for further efforts to confront persistent structural inequities, hold corporations accountable to the common good, and build power for working Minnesotans.

One of the chief sources of the power inherent in the alignment model MFE pioneered is that it is eminently flexible. The particular institutional forms that such an alignment takes at any given moment can be built, discarded, and rebuilt with slightly different components, as circumstances require. While this summary has focused on the role played by such groups as SEIU, ISALAH, CTUL, TAMN, *Inquilinxs Unidxs*, and TTS in achieving these victories, the work would not have been successful had it not also attracted the support of multiple other organizational participants, some, like NOC, which have passed from the scene, and others such as the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, the Saint Paul Federation of Educators, that continue to collaborate in this work.⁴⁰ Shared leadership and deep collaboration across an organization ecosystem can give individual organizations more power than they ever could have achieved alone.

Building power in this way puts a premium on relationships of trust and honesty. Any alignment as diverse and inclusive as the one the Minnesotans have constructed is bound to harbor multiple internal tensions, elements of competition, inevitable personality conflicts, and even

³⁹ E.J. Dionne, “The Minnesota Miracle Should Serve as a Model for Democrats,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/06/04/democratic-party-minnesota-legislature-progressives/>.

⁴⁰ The list of organizations that have participated in one iteration or another of the Minnesota alignment since 2011 is long and includes: The Awood Center, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-Minnesota); CTUL; Clean Up the River Environment (CURE); Communications Workers of America (CWA); Education Minnesota; Inquilinxs Unidxs por Justicia (United Renters for Justice); ISALAH; Jewish Community Action (JCA); Land Stewardship Project; Main Street Alliance; Comunidades Organizando el Poder y la Accion Latina (COPAL); Minneapolis Federation of Teachers; Minnesota 350; Minnesota Nurses Association; Navigate Minnesota; New Justice Project; NOC; OutFront Minnesota; SEIU Local 26; SEIU Local 284; SEIU Healthcare Minnesota; SEIU Minnesota State Council; Sierra Club; St. Paul Federation of Educators; TakeAction Minnesota, and Unidos MN.

occasional sharp, principled disagreements. Minnesota has not been immune to these realities. But, as the Minnesota example shows, sound relationship-building and an inspiring yet realizable vision can act as a glue that keeps organizations moving together toward a common goal.

One key takeaway of the Minnesota story is that the political and legislative breakthroughs won there were not the product of a campaign that set out from the beginning to wage political and legislative fights. Rather, the Minnesota victories began in struggles that brought together workers, renters, immigrants, and others in campaigns that challenged corporate power and built power through direct action and the alignment of multiple organizations and constituencies around a common analysis. As those groups went from campaign to campaign, they built confidence, persuading both their members and political figures to expand their horizons of what they believed was possible to win.

The wins racked up in 2023 will therefore not lead to a dissolution of the alignment that first began taking shape during the Great Recession, as might happen in many more traditional coalitional efforts. Rather, these wins will now serve as the point of departure for the movement's next phase. Having won big legislative victories in 2023, these organizations are now gearing up for the next stage of their fight which will be inaugurated in what might be the biggest "Week of Action" yet, a series of potential strikes and planned protests set for March 2024. It could be that Minnesota is not done teaching progressives how to fight and win a new and better world.

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For more information on Bargaining for the Common Good: <https://bargainingforthecommongood.org>

For more information on the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor & the Working Poor: <https://lwp.georgetown.edu>